Why Obama Probably Can't Win--But Romney Could Still Lose

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It’s known as Ockham’s razor.

Attributed to 14th-century philosopher William of Ockham, it advocates seeking the simplest explanation necessary to make sense of things. The popular acronym KISS captures its spirit—“keep it simple stupid.”

Alas, Ockham’s adage finds few takers today among contemporary electoral analysts. Amid the pundit literati predicting presidential elections, the slogan might be, “seek complexity, lots of it.”

This criticism applies particularly to the various and sundry “models” used by the “punditocracy” to predict who will win the next election. These models usually include dozens of variables using arcane statistics to make electoral predictions. Complex and convoluted, they use bazookas to hunt flies when a good, serviceable fly swatter works just as well.

But the even more serious problem with some of the presidential predictions models is that they ignore much of the enormous changes in the history of presidential elections since the end of World War II.

Not well understood is that American electoral history divides sharply into two very different eras. The first era now largely irrelevant to modern elections ranged from 1800-1945. During this period, one or the other of America’s two major political parties tended to dominate presidential elections, sometimes for decades at a time.

From 1800-1856, the Democrats dominated, winning 13 of 15 elections while opposition Whigs won only two. Then from 1860-1928, the Republicans had their turn, winning 18 elections while holding Democrats to just two presidents, each winning two terms. Finally, rounding out the string, the New Deal Democratic coalition garnered Democratic victories in five straight elections from 1932-1948.

Two things are significant about this 150-year stretch when one party held power for long intervals of time. One is that this century and a half of presidential elections inspired many of today’s complex predictive models. The other important fact is that this pattern ended abruptly in 1945.

With the accession of Harry Truman to the presidency, those long electoral winning streaks came to a screeching stop. Instead, since 1952 the country has witnessed some six decades of fierce but balanced two party competitions between the major parties. In that time we have had 10 presidents, five Democrats and five Republicans.

This roughly 60-year period has recorded the most unsettled and volatile presidential cycle in American history, witnessing the two parties regularly trading the presidency every eight years. The normal pattern is
uncomplicated: Party A wins two terms in a row unless encountering major economic reversals in the first term (high unemployment, low economic growth, etc.). If major economic reversals occur in the first term, Party A doesn’t win a second term. In either event Party A almost never wins a third consecutive term.

There has been a single exception to this two-terms-and-out pattern. That exception occurred in 1988 when Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis lost to George H.W. Bush after squandering a one-time lead of 17 points. Many explain that aberration to Dukakis’s poor performance as a campaigner and weak campaign organization.

Applying this modern two-terms-and-out pattern to the 2012 race is not likely to bring a grin to Barack Obama. At best, 2012 looks perilous for him and his party. While a robust economy would probably ensure four more years for the Democrats, that’s precisely what they don’t have. And the one theme that runs through virtually all the prediction models is critical role of economic conditions.

Economic hard times bring political hard times for the party in power. That was true for incumbents Martin Van Buren (1840), and Herrbert Hoover (1932), and in more recent times Jimmy Carter (1976) and George H.W. Bush (1992). All lost their re-election contests. Obama now seems poised to follow these earlier presidents denied a second term because of a bad economy.

Can anything save Obama from the fate of his hard luck predecessors? Ironically the only person who might do it is his opponent Mitt Romney. And Romney could do it by running a weak campaign.

Former Democratic presidential nominee Michael Dukakis has already showed him the way. In 1988 Governor Dukakis, against all odds, successfully snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. The star-crossed Dukakis in his race against H.W. Bush, learned a painful lesson: no matter how promising the race looks, it is possible to lose if you run a bad enough campaign. Hoping that a second Massachusetts governor might duplicate that feat in 2012 is probably now Obama’s best shot at a second term.

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